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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001342

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA CHARTS MARCH 14 ELECTION COURSE,
HINTS AT DANGERS AHEAD

REF: BEIRUT 1320

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A thoughtful and deliberate Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea outlined March 14's presidential election strategy and the opposition's efforts to scuttle or otherwise disrupt the election. Geagea stressed that the U.S. could best serve itself and Lebanon in the period before the election by limiting official U.S. statements to generic support for holding the election on time and according to the Lebanese constitution. He urged that we not go into details in our public statements. Geagea questioned Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman's political neutrality, noting that Sleiman had not declared that he opposed resistance to the election. Geagea also thought that Sleiman may well attempt to take over as prime minister, should tensions between March 14 and the opposition result in civil disorder. End summary.

U.S.-MARCH 14 ELECTION GOALS: THE LESS SAID THE BETTER

2. (C) In an August 31 meeting with the Ambassador, LF Executive Committee President Samir Geagea, accompanied by advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehmeh, concurred with the Ambassador that it was not necessary that the USG be vocal (at least not at this point) about opposition to amending the constitution that would allow LAF Commander Sleiman to become president. Geagea stressed that it would be better for U.S. (and Lebanese) interests to limit official U.S. comments to support for holding the election on time and according to the Lebanese constitution. Anything more would be perceived as U.S. interference. Expressing approval over recent USG public comments, he urged that we keep our comments generic and not go into details.

CHRISTIAN HARMONY--SOME MINOR DISCORDANCE

3. (C) Geagea termed the August 20 gathering of March 14 Christian leaders which he hosted (reftel) as "good" because they had agreed on a presidential strategy and overcome problems. In his words, the meeting was about "declaring March 14 and Christian legitimacy." As for MP and presidential hopeful Robert Ghanem's absence, Geagea said they had wanted to keep the focus on the two preferred choices: Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb. Geagea added he

would receive Ghanem privately next week and continue to engage him, thus keeping him in store as a possible compromise candidate. Former President Amine Gemayel, miffed at not having been asked to host the event and at being passed over as a candidate, was finally persuaded to attend, although, Geagea noted, it had taken some coaxing. Furthermore, some other March 14 members including former MP and Saad Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury were upset at not having been invited at all, because of, as Geagea termed it, their "other connotation", a reference to their closeness to Hariri's (Sunni-based) Future Movement, and the fact that their political support rested on Sunni votes.

NASSIB LAHOUD'S THE MAN--AT LEAST FOR NOW

14. (C) Geagea unequivocally stated that at the next meeting in about a month's time, Nassib Lahoud would be chosen as the March 14 candidate. Harb would accept the selection of Lahoud, as he has stated he does not want to be elected by a simple majority (the March 14 mantra countering the opposition's insistence on a two-thirds quorum.) However, in the event a two-thirds quorum was achieved, then Harb could be the compromise candidate. Commenting on the opposition's intense dislike of Lahoud, Geagea said they perceive him as a pro-Hariri Saudi puppet. When the Ambassador asked how Lahoud could be seen as a Saudi puppet when he so frequently clashed with Rafiq Hariri, Geagea said that Lahoud's differences with Hariri were seen as tactical only.

OMINOUS SIGNS OF ARMED OPPOSITION RESISTANCE

15. (C) Terming Hizballah "the master of the game," Geagea

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asserted that armed Hizballah members and their supporters were preparing for armed clashes should they see that March 14 is determined to proceed with the election with only a simple majority. Furthermore, according to Geagea, opposition candidate Michel Aoun's supporters all over Lebanon were preparing themselves for confrontation, with about 1000 receiving military training in the Biqa'--a dangerous development, as it would be the first time Aounists resorted to arms. Geagea thought that "someone" in the Army is aware of this, and is doing nothing to counter it. Since LAF Commander Sleiman has not publicly opposed those who resist holding the election, Geagea predicted Sleiman might well attempt to take over as prime minister, should tensions between March 14 and the opposition lead to violence. With regard to opposition supporters' symbolic occupation of tents in downtown Beirut since late 2005, Geagea said their numbers had recently increased from 20-30 persons to 200 or more. Nevertheless, he did not expect any real action by the opposition until after October 12, or after Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan.

FELTMAN